

# Angulimāla Paritta

A mother' manual

with

Introduction, Translation and Notes

**Long before the initiation of worldwide movements like Women's Liberation and Feminist Activists, the Buddha appears to have felt the need to pay serious respect to the role the woman plays as mother of children. This was, of course, more than twenty-five centuries ago and was introduced to mankind in the eastern theatre of the world, namely India. To mistake this attitude as assignment to women of today's 'degraded position' of child-producing machines is both lamentable and criminally incorrect.**

It comes from a much more to-be respected conservasionist attitude that the Buddha adopted about a total growth [i.e. physical, moral and intellectual] of humanity. The concept of mother [*mātā*], in an age of pre-test-tube babies, looms large in Buddhist thinking. *Mātā mittam sake ghare: The mother is the friend in one's own home* says the Samyutta Nikaya [SN. I. 37]. The woman, as the growing up young girl in the home, is guarded with serious concern as the future wife and would-be mother. She must be fit and qualified enough to stand up to the count down before being launched into the challenging role of multi-purpose womanhood. Whichever be the century or country we live in or are moving into, these roles cannot be, with any degree of sanity in our heads, be underrated or underestimated. The Buddhists are not oriented to labour too much to accommodate unmarried mothers or fatherless children. They are believed to be lapses which are to be conscientiously guarded against. They rightly visualise the dangers and deficiencies of single-parent homes.

This respect for motherhood in a civilized social set-up has directed Buddhist

thinking to prepare for preliminaries of maternity care. Physical ease and comfort of a pregnant would-be mother and her clinical mental grooming for motherhood are very much part and parcel of a well-run household with generous and well-meaning in-laws. Sri Lanka of more than fifty sixty years ago knew of many miniature domestic ceremonies of the white magic type which were quietly carried out in the home for the security and well-being of expectant mothers. The morn to evening day-time ceremony of *Maṭi-ata-perīma*, *Ata-gaha-metirīma* or *Ambakola-atten-metirīma* were delightful rituals carried out in our village homes on the advent of the arrival into the family of new-born babies. Everyone of us in the home, the young and the old, made our contribution towards it by carrying messages to the master of the ritual in his own home [not through calls on the cell-tell], by gathering from the nearby woods the fruits and leaves needed for the creation of the associated artifacts. They included ant-hill clay for moulding the sun-disc, tender coconut leaves for numerous types of decorations, creepers like *hīressa* and leaves of the *tolabo* lily plant, perhaps to be used as mock weapons of offence and defence of various divinities associated with the ritual.

Besides these, there is also maternity care coming [to the Sri Lankan Buddhists] via religious considerations. In the category of Buddhist *parittas*, we have the Angulimala Sutta [M.III. 97 - 105] referred to above, the use of which for this purpose appears to date back to the time of the Buddha himself. This sutta tells that Angulimala, the erstwhile bandit, after his ordination as a disciple under the Buddha, reported to him of a woman whom he had seen during his alms round, suffering severe pains owing to her pregnancy. Seeing Angulimala's anguish and concern, the Buddha admonished him to go to that woman in pain and through the asseveration of his personal religious sanctity to wish her well and pray for the security and well-being of her unborn babe. Angulimala immediately pointed out to the Buddha, w9ty honesty, the guilt of his pre-ordination crimes and the Buddha promptly advised him to make the asseveration from the time of his admission to the noble order [*ariyāya jātiyā jāto*]. Angulimala acted accordingly and she is said to have been immediately

relieved [*Atha kho sotthi itthiyā ahoṣi sotthi gabbhassa*. op. cit. p. 103]. It is undoubtedly the spiritual prowess of Angulimala that did it. Note that he was no *arahant at the time*. All that happened is described as *sotthi itthiyā ahoṣi* = To the woman there was security and well-being. There is not a word about the delivery of the baby.

It appears that in the years that followed, this incident has been simulated in its entirety. In the manner of other *paritta* recitals where the monks in congregation emphatically assert the power of the Buddha, Dhamma and the Sangha [as in the Ratana Sutta], and thereby invoke blessings on those in need of them, in the case of Angulimala *paritta* too, the monks in congregation appear to repeat the words of Angulimala which are no more than a record of his own spiritual prowess, and invoke blessings thereby on the pregnant mother and her unborn babe. However, in the Angulimala *paritta* as recited today, we discover ten additional lines as a preface to what Angulimala himself recited under the direction of the Buddha.

It immediately discloses the manner in which the Angulimala *paritta* appears to have developed itself to a high-powered pregnancy [or we should say **child-delivery**] *paritta*. Those ten lines in translation are as follows.

Whosoever shall recite this *paritta*, the seat on which he sits,  
 The water with which it is washed shall eliminate all labour pains.  
 With ease shall there be delivery, that very moment it shall be done.  
 This *paritta* which the Lord-of-the-World had given unto Angulimala,  
 Is one of great majesty which shall keep its efficacy for a whole eon.  
 That *paritta* we shall now chant.

This shift of accent in the recital of the Angulimāla *paritta* from the care of the pregnant mother and her unborn child to one of easy delivery in the labour room has led to a great deal of corrosive neglect in the home, both personal and

emotional.

It is tragic and lamentable that this would leave both the would-be-mother and her unborn child, more or less, unrecognised for the first nine months of her pregnancy. Today in Sri Lanka, it is only during the last few days before delivery that the Buddhist monk would come on the scene and accept responsibility to chant for her the Angulimāla *paritta* as the child delivery *sutta* to ensure her a safe and easy delivery. We would point out that this is the very opposite of what was intended to be in the Buddhist community.

The growth of this legendary process is witnessed in the Commentary to the Angulimāla Sutta [MA. III. 337]. The Commentary elaborates it in this manner. The Elder Angulimāla learnt this asseveration procedure or *saccakiriya* from the Buddha and went to the woman to provide her comfort and security. As males were not allowed within the labour room, the monk was accommodated behind a curtain from where he did his chant. That very moment the woman is said to have delivered her baby with perfect ease.

In recognition of the very great efficacy of this *sutta*, a seat is said to have been constructed at the place where the monk did the chant. This seat is believed to have acquired such a reputation for its power and potency for easy delivery of offspring, it is said that even animals with difficulty of delivery benefit by being placed on it. In the case of feeble ones who cannot make the journey there, the water with which the seat is washed is to be applied on their head. This enables easy delivery. Even other diseases are said to be cured thereby [*Yā dubbalā hoti na sakkā ānetuṃ tassā piṭhaka-dhovana-udakaṃ netvā sīse siñcanti taṃ khaṇaṃ yeva gabbha-vuṭṭhānam hoti. Aññaṃ pi rogaṃ vūpasameti. Yāvakkappā tiṭṭhanaka-pātihāriyaṃ kit ' etaṃ* . MA. III. 338]. Thus in Sri Lanka, the Angulimāla *paritta* today has changed its rightful place in being a pre-natal child-and-mother-care chant, to one of easy delivery in the labour room. The role of chant-water has reached its highest ascendancy.

This same Buddhist concern for pre-natal maternity care of both the mother and the unborn child [which would be deemed a basic and fundamental humanitarian concern] is seen to exist in the Mahayana countries of the Far East like China and Japan as far back as the 8th century A.D. With the profusion and proliferation of *Bodhisattvas* in the Mahayana to serve in specialised capacities, it is not surprising to discover one like Koyasu Kwan-non [Kwan-non of Easy Deliverance], a lady-like Goddess of Mercy, holding a child in her hands. Alice Getty thinks she 'was unquestionably brought to Japan from Northern India via Central Asia and China'. She also further says: 'We know from reliable texts that in the eighth century there existed a Kan-non cult in Japan, and that the Kan-non was called Koyasu or the Kan-non who brings about Easy Deliverance'. [Alice Getty - Gods of Northern Buddhism, p. 96 f.].

For purpose of comparison with the obviously earlier genesis of the **mother-care** concept in the Angulimala Sutta, we reproduce here a statement from Alice Getty's Gods of Northern Buddhism.

In the *Bukkya Daiji-ten* is the following legend: The Empress Komyo (710-760), being with child, invoked the Shinto goddess Amaterasu, and prayed that she might have an easy deliverance. One night, she saw in a dream the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara standing at her bedside, and when she awoke she found a small image of the Bodhisattva lying beside her. She kept it preciously until after her deliverance, and then ordered it to be placed inside a statue of the 'thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara which she had enshrined in the Taisan-ji (temple of Easy Deliverance) in Kyoto. According to popular belief, the Empress Komyo founded the Taisan-ji and dedicated it to the Koyasu Kwan-non, and it has remained up to this day one of the most flourishing centres of devotion in Japan. [p. 97]

With due deference to the traditions of both the Theravada and the Mahayana on this subject, we therefore wish to add here the text of the

Angulimala *paritta*, indicating what the original canonical version was and how it was used as **a simple pre-natal mother-and-child protective chant** [*sotthi te hotu sotthi gabbhassa*] as well as its apparently more deflected, and necessarily more elaborated Easy Deliverance concept [*sotthinā gabbha-vuṭṭhānam yañ ca sādheti tam khaṇe*], with its true parallel in Koyasu Kwan-non of Japan. We are more inclined to popularise what we consider to be the earlier canonical tradition of **pre-natal care of the mother and the child** [*sotthi te hotu sotthi gabbhassa*] which can quite harmlessly begin from the earliest indications of pregnancy, thus building up confidence and comfort in the mind of the would-be-mother. That kind of religious solace, the presence of comforting religious grace of the *tisaraṇa* must necessarily come to all areas of life in society, well before the outburst of crisis situations. This would eliminate the not very honourable last minute rush to wayside-shrine-divinities for guard and protection through the local ***bāra-hāra*** type of supplication resorted to in Sri Lanka.



## Angulimala Parittam

### Paritta as recited today

Its prefatory introduction.

*Prittam yaṃ bhaṇantassa nisinnaṭṭhāna-dhovanaṃ  
udakam ' pi vināsesi sabbam eva prissayaṃ.  
sotthinā gabbha-vuṭṭhānaṃ yañ ca sādheti taṃ khaṇe  
therassa ' ṅgulimālassa lokanāthena bhāsitaṃ  
kappaṭṭhāyi-mahātejaṃ parittam taṃ bhaṇāmahe.*

Translation

Whosoever shall recite this *paritta*, the seat on which he sits,

The water with which it is washed shall eliminate all labour pains.  
 With ease shall there be delivery, that very moment it shall be done.  
 This *paritta* which the Lord-of-the World had given unto Angulimala,  
 That *paritta* we shall now chant.

**\*\*\* The original form of the Paritta** in which it was delivered by none other than the Buddha himself and in which form it should be chanted at any time and any where **is not and should by no means be** for delivery of babies. It shall be chanted **solely for the protection and well-being of the child-bearing mother and the unborn child** [*gabbha*] **she is carrying** [*sotthi te sotthi gabbhassā*].

Text of the original *paritta* as delivered by the Buddha is as follows:

*Yato ' haṃ bhagini ariyāya jātiyā jāto  
 nābhijānāmi sañcicca pāṇaṃ jīvitā voropetā.  
 Tena saccena  
 sotthi te hotu  
 sotthi gabbhassā ' ti.*

Translation

O, Sister, from the time I entered  
 this noble life of a recluse,  
 I know not having deprived  
 any living thing of its life.  
 By the truth of this, may there be  
 happiness and well-being  
 to you and to your unborn child.

**Note:**

The original text with which the Buddha is said to have commissioned Elder Angulimala to go to the woman in pain and make an asseveration [*sacca-kiriya*] to relieve her of her agony consists only of the eighteen words given above,

beginning with *Yato 'ham...* and ending with *gabbhassa*. [See M.III. 102 and MA. III. 337 f.]. These alone tell us of Thera Angulimāla's pre-arahantship spiritual prowess whereby he was able to provide comfort [*sotthā*] to the woman in pregnancy discomfort. The ideas expressed in the obviously later composed preface reduces the force of the directly communicated reigio-spiritual power of the *sacca-kiriyā* and brings it down to the level of a water-powered ritual.



## **Some vital corrections needed today in the presentation of the Aṅgulimāla Paritta And its use in the lives of the Buddhists in Sri Lanka**

*Professor Dhammavihari Thera*

In the vast majority of the books named Piruvāṇā Potvahanse or Maha Pirit Pota which are printed in Sinhala characters and are now in circulation in Sri Lanka, the Aṅgulimāla Paritta is most lamentably misrepresented. The Catubhāṇavārapāli in the Simon Hevāvitārana Bequest Aṭṭhakathā Series does not contain the Aṅgulimāla paritta. In the Piruvāṇā Potvahanse presentation, there are two major areas of error. Although we have repeatedly suggested to the highest authority in the land on the subject of the need for a bureau of standards in Buddhist studies, it has fallen well below deaf ears. We have no Court of Appeal, through which we could rectify such errors, neither among the clergy nor among the academics.

The error No.1 is that what is presented as the Aṅgulimāla Paritta in the Pirit Pota is a tragic combination of what is truly a part of what is in the sutta by this name in the Majjhima Nikāya, together with a pitiably garbled version of a



Commentarial tradition about date of origin of which we would say no more than that it is Commentarial. This covers a vast range of both time and place. Both parts are combined and presented as one genuine whole. Knowing what the Buddha intended, as is very clear from Aṅgulimāla Sutta, this to us is an ingenious bit of smuggling.

The Commentary, apparently associating itself with some forms of provincial magical beliefs, says that the water, with which the chair on which the reciter of the Aṅgulimāla Paritta sits is washed, is capable of facilitating easy delivery to a pregnant woman. Sri Lankan monks keep chanting this to you over and over again.

*Parittaṃ yaṃ bhaṇantassa nisinnatṭhānadhovanṃ  
Udakam'pi vināsesi sabbameva parissayaṃ  
Sotthinā gabbhavuṭṭhānaṃ tañca sādheti taṃ khaṇe*

It further says that such a chair, carved out of stone, did exist at a later date, in some provincial Indian town. It is not difficult to stretch one's imagination to contain such degradations, through time and space, within the sublime religious core of a religion like Buddhism. Forget not the hands and the lands through which Buddhism had to pass, in its journey from the north to the south of India. It is now quite clear, with the evidence available, that none of these can pass off as part of the original paritta. Does anybody want to cash on the gullibility of the credulous listener? We strongly feel that it is not a day too early in Sri Lanka to turn a new leaf in the presentation of Buddhism, irrespective of as to who is anxious to learn Buddhism anew through the fashionable and currently prestigious media of television or not.

The error No.2 is that almost all Piruvāṇā Pirit Potas attempt to present the Aṅgulimāla Paritta as being imparted by the Omniscient One [*Sarvagñā*] to the powerful and prestigious [*mahesākya*] arhant Aṅgulimāla. This, it must be

pointed out, is also a catastrophic blunder. It is an un-called for glorification. At the time thera Aṅgulimāla brought comfort to the pregnant mother who was in great pain due to the misplacement of the child in the womb, and to her unborn child within, on the instruction of the Buddha, he was only a newly ordained monk in the Order.

The asseveration [*saccikiriya*] he made that **he knew not having consciously destroyed any life ever since he became an ariyan disciple**, and that alone, brought comfort [*soṭṭh*] severally to the mother [*itthiyā*] and to the unborn child [*gabbhassa*]. This was definitely a pre-arhant achievement of Aṅgulimāla. Nor is Aṅgulimāla said to have facilitated, at any stage, the delivery of the child. It was after this event of blessing the pregnant mother that Aṅgulimāla became an arhant. For all these details, please read the Aṅgulimāla Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya.

There is also currently another serious error in the application of this Aṅgulimāla Paritta in the service of pregnancy care. On the advice of someone, the original source being unknown to us as to whether it is the village sorcerer, the astrologer or the village temple monk, or even an elderly man or woman of the village at that, the time of chant of the Aṅgulimāla Paritta to the pregnant mother has been deferred to the last week of pregnancy. We know of numerous instances of monks, both of the town and the village, chanting the tender Tambili coconut with the Aṅgulimāla paritta and delivering it to the father or husband of the pregnant girl, with the instruction that the water of the chanted nut be consumed by the pregnant mother before proceeding for the delivery of the baby. What a shamelessly ugly enactment of village magic with the connivance of monk and layman?

We were much more bewildered to find in some of the Sri Lankan Buddhist temples, both in London and Paris, copies of some brand of the Piruvāṇā Pota which contained the following instruction appended to the Aṅgulimāla Paritta. " In

cases of difficulty of delivery of the baby, let some water be chanted with this paritta and the water be applied on the abdomen of the pregnant mother. Then this would ease the delivery of the baby." These books are on the common run even in Sri Lanka today. In the name of the Buddha, Dhamma and the Sangha who would detect these wild stories and take necessary action? Is it the glamorously labelled fictitious ministries, grandiloquent news paper reporters or non-existent SLS men for Buddhist affairs?

It is impossible for us to miss at this point the Buddhist sense of love and care reflected here in the story of thera Āṅgulimāla and the equally sensitive reaction on the part of the Buddha. It pervades human life in its entirety, without any regional differences. It just breathes the welfare of humanity as a whole, through the symbolism of the pregnant mother and the unborn child. About 800 A.D., it produced in Japan a delightful statue of a goddess [an Avalokitesvara] who presides over pregnancy who came to be called Koyasu Kannon. She was seen in a dream by the Empress who was pregnant at the time. She had this statue made [reproduced herewith] and installed in a famous temple in Japan.

This is why we have established at the Narada Center, nearly a year ago, the Pregnancy Care Consortium to invoke blessings on pregnant mothers, at any stage in their pregnancy, and their unborn babies [*sotthi te hotu sotthi gabbhassa*]. The date is the first Sunday every month. For this purpose, we use the asseveration of thera Āṅgulimāla referred to above. We give every would-be-mother a laminated copy of the real Āṅgulimāla paritta, together with its English and Sinhala translations, for use by the husbands, parents or the in-laws. The number of pregnant girls now being served by us stands at 105. Let us ungrudgingly pay adequate respect to the Buddha word that " the Mother is the Friend in one's Home = *Mātā mittam sake ghare.*"

